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## Trash talk

The sobering truth about recycling in the valley

BY EMMILY BRISTOL

PHOTOS BY BILL HUGHES

Las Vegas is comprised mostly of residential transplants. Each month, thousands of new people arrive. And like a newlywed couple's household, the newbies bring with them hobbies, interests and habits that came from somewhere else.

One of those habits is recycling. But so many of the people who move here, quickly notice that recycling isn't as prevalent and encouraged in Southern Nevada as it is in other metropolitan areas.



Tara Pike

It's no surprise that a city like Las Vegas (and its surrounding suburbs) has an ambiguous relationship with recycling. This urban area is younger than most, even by West Coast standards. And the kind of lifestyle celebrated here, a laissez faire world built on the freedom to do what one chooses outside of common societal conventions, is just the sort that would shun a do-gooder notion like recycling.

Let's face it. Many retirees flock here to avoid paying into a system they feel they've already built. Young, hip singles want a life that is free of the Puritanical vibe back home. And even the suburban, khaki-pants-wearing family set can live their lives divorced of a required sense of obligation to their neighbors.

And there's empty desert for miles around.

It's that cultural identity that makes living here great. But it can keep us from doing those chore-laden activities, like eating our vegetables and sorting garbage.

Which leads one to question:  
What's up with recycling in the valley?

Nevada officially began recycling after a law was passed in the 1991 legislative session mandating that the state reach a goal of 25 percent solid waste recycling. Regulating recycling falls to the Nevada Division of

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Environmental Protection - but the burden fans out to the counties when it comes to reporting the actual numbers.

In counties with more than 40,000 people, recycling programs are required. That means there are five counties, including Carson City, that report their recycling numbers back to the NDEP. Counties with less than 40,000 people are left to do as they want. Some have programs and some report numbers back, but others don't.

The numbers that most people care about are those that have to do with residential programs. In waste management jargon that's called "municipal solid waste," which comes from residential, offices, hotels and resorts. Municipal solid waste has nothing to do with automotive, hazardous, industrial, construction or demolition waste.



Allie Smith

According to NDEP's most recent numbers, from 2003, Nevada's recycling rate for municipal solid waste is at 19 percent. And Clark County is part of the problem, as it trails the state's largest counties at 17 percent. Carson City is at 30 percent, while Washoe County reported 27 percent. Douglas had the lowest recycling rate, with 16 percent.



"Recycling is not just about saving the Earth. It's a business, too." Silver Dollar Recycling Manager Brandon Smith

"I definitely think they should be better," NDEP recycling coordinator Dave Friedman said of Clark and Douglas counties' numbers, as well as the state's overall number.

Clark County Health District environmental health manager Doug Joslin said Clark County gets unfairly pegged as a low recycler, due to its economic backbone: tourism.

"When you have almost 2 million people and 36 million visitors, that creates challenges," Joslin said.

Tara Pike of the UNLV recycling program thinks Nevada could do better.

"We're not doing as good as we could," Pike said.

Pike started the Rebel Recycling program in 1995, after she wrote her Environmental Science thesis on the topic in 1991.

In 2004, UNLV's recycling program diverted 541.6 tons of material from the county landfill. This was a 44.8-percent gain over 2003. The university program recycled 40.5 tons of newspaper, 1.3 tons of aluminum and nearly 7 tons of plastic (types one and two only) in 2003.



A Republic Services, Inc. spokeswoman refused to give out numbers on how much the company recycles each year. The company has the exclusive franchise on curbside recycling in Southern Nevada.

The company is required to report its numbers to the Clark County Health District. According to the CCHD, Republic Services reported gathering 19,394 tons of newspaper, 339 tons of mixed metals (mostly aluminum and tin from residential sources) and 1,251 tons of plastic (types one and two only) in 2003. Republic Services reported an overall diversion of 117,817 tons of recyclables from municipal solid waste sources, most of which came from its curbside recycling program.

It's difficult to evaluate how Nevada compares to other states, Friedman said, because each state comes up with its own formula for calculating its total recycling percentage. For instance, some states count waste products like reused asphalt, while Nevada doesn't.

However, Friedman said that Nevada ranks slightly lower than other states in its recycling proficiency.

But maybe there's hope. At least we have statewide recycling legislation.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, recycling and composting activities prevented about 64 million tons of material from ending up in landfills and incinerators in 1999. The U.S. recycles 28 percent of its waste, the agency reported.

The key to recycling in Southern Nevada is knowing where to look, and is dependent on where you live.

Those who rent an apartment here already know that recycling programs for multi-family dwellings are all but nonexistent. Most apartment and condominium complexes refuse to give up parking spaces to house a recycling center. And Republic Services is not required to serve multi-family housing developments.

In fact, it's a Catch-22. Under state law, Republic Services is allowed to classify multi-family housing as a commercial development. Likewise, commercial recycling companies aren't required to serve apartments because they classify them as residential. This keeps both residential and commercial companies free from picking up recyclables in multi-family housing.

This is no small thing. According to the Clark County planning department's most recent housing-unit census (published July 1, 2004), roughly 39 percent of the county's 675,558 total housing units are multi-family (including duplexes, apartments, townhomes and condos).

Recycling-minded locals find this out for themselves.

Apartment dweller Thad Bell, who moved here three and a half years ago from Michigan, lamented his problem of trying to recycle. After calling several local services, including the county, he felt the situation was hopeless.

"What I thought would be a simple task -- getting my recycling picked up from my apartment complex -- has turned into a fruitless, disheartening ordeal," he said.

Now he and his fiancée drive their recyclables twice a month to Republic Services' drop-off recycling center at 333 W. Gowan Road (see sidebar for more information).

"We've kind of given up hope that anything is going to change," Bell said.

Similarly, Allie Smith, a local of 20 years, said she was disappointed when she tried to organize recycling in her old apartment complex.

"No one wanted to lose any parking places," she said.

Friedman admits this problem stems from how the state recycling code is written.

"The statute actually says 'residences,'" Friedman said. "I guess they've come to define it in Clark County. I guess they can say that 'residence' can be defined as a single-family dwelling. There's never been anything to challenge that."

So Clark County recycling companies are getting off the hook because the word 'residence' isn't properly defined to include multi-family domiciles? Here Friedman waffled.

"I don't think it's a complete cop-out. It is obviously a logistical problem," the state recycling coordinator said. "But, I don't know. If you want to find solutions to things, I think you can find solutions to things."

Republic Services President Bob Coyle, who moved to Southern Nevada from California in September to assume his position at the company, said he was not yet familiar with all of the reasons why multi-family residences get left out of recycling programs.

"The county has not asked us to implement a multi-family recycling program," Coyle said. "But, to take it one step further, I can tell you I've been involved in a lot of multi-family recycling programs in California, and multi-family recycling is probably the single most challenging recycling that the trash collection company can do. People in apartments tend to take their trash to the most accessible point to where their car's at -- and so if that happens to be the recycling container, they just throw the trash in it. So there's a significant problem with contamination."

Joslin said the issue of multi-family recycling is more about a lack of space and a lack of planning.

"The core issue has always been [about zoning requirements]," Joslin said. "Things are always improving. This is a young city."

But there's hope for those living in multi-family housing, yet.

"One of the things that we've recommended is [to] address the multi-family issue by saying that there should be ordinances that when someone develops one of these places there should be sufficient space for recycling as well as garbage collection," Friedman said. "That's a very tough battle. And we've also suggested to increase the number of drive-up drop-offs."

Everyone agrees that the way to have a successful recycling system is convenience and user education.

The No. 1 most convenient method of recycling for homeowners is at the curb. Republic Services is the only company in Southern Nevada who picks up recyclables at the curb.

"A curbside program can be very convenient, if done right," Pike said.

Twenty years ago, only one curbside recycling program existed in the United States, according to the EPA. By 1998, 9,000 curbside programs and 12,000 recyclable drop-off centers had sprouted up across the nation.

Coyle said educating consumers was a priority as soon as he arrived. Republic Services sent out a one-page flier that included five tips for recycling and the 2005 curbside pick-up calendar in January service bills.

"That's one of the first things I noticed when I came here," Coyle said. "We hadn't done any consumer education in a while, so we sent out fliers in January."

The process starts with homeowners sorting their waste into the red (for aluminum, tin and plastic), white (for newspaper, phone books and magazines) and blue (for rinsed,

uncapped glass bottles) bins. On scheduled pick-up days every two weeks, a special recycling truck picks up the items. Glass is sorted into three colors -- clear, green and brown -- at the truck, while paper and aluminum go into other compartments. All of the recyclables are then taken back to the recycling center in North Las Vegas. Items undergo another hand-sort and then a mechanical sort, before being processed and dispatched to various vendors.

But the system doesn't always work the way it is designed to. Sometimes mistakes are made by both users and providers of the service. And sometimes, the system is hurt by a lack of faith.

"There is a concern out there or rumors out there," said Pike, who abstains from using Republic's program in favor of taking her recyclables to UNLV.

Here, too, Smith has become doubtful of the system.

"I was so excited about having curbside recycling," Smith said about her move into a house.

In 2003, Smith said she was standing in her front yard on recycling pick-up day. She says she saw garbage-collection workers unload recycling bins into a regular trash truck. The incident caused her to decide to take her recyclables to the UNLV public drop-off station (see sidebar) rather than continue to use Republic Services.

Coyle said there is no way he can know if the incident happened. However, he added that if anyone witnesses an incident like that, he wants it reported.

"It's a terminating offense for a driver to co-mingle the recycling with the trash. He could actually lose his job if a person reported it and we caught him," Coyle said. "That's a cardinal sin in recycling."

A dip in state recycling numbers in the mid-1990s may have been partially blamed on a depressed vendor economy, Friedman said. Less recycled material was needed by companies, which hurt the overall waste management market.

"Recycling is not just about saving the Earth. It's a business, too," said Silver Dollar Recycling Manager Brandon Smith, whose local commercial metal recycler moves about 180,000 tons of product a year from Nevada, Southern Utah, Northern Arizona and Western California.

Friedman said that many businesses, such as those that use paper and aluminum, depend on post-consumer materials to make their products.

The process can be pricey from the pick-up perspective, too. The program provided by Republic Services is already factored into residential billing, whether one uses the service or not. But, Coyle said, what consumers pay in their bills does not cover the true cost of the service.

"We don't make money at it because the cost of running the second truck is so expensive it's really a lost liter," he said.

In fact, Coyle said, even the market value for the recyclables his company sorts and sells to manufacturing vendors doesn't turn a profit.

"What we gain in the sale [of post-consumer recyclable waste] doesn't pay for the actual cost of collection," he said.

By far, the most popular -- and profitable -- recyclables are paper, plastic and aluminum. The EPA reports that 42 percent of all paper, 40 percent of all plastic soft-drink bottles, 55 percent of all aluminum beer and soft drink cans, 57 percent of all steel packaging, and 52 percent of all major appliances are now recycled.

Meanwhile, there are those who don't believe that recycling does any good.

Las Vegas' own Penn & Teller had an episode dedicated to the myth of recycling in their second season of their Showtime television program "Bullshit." On the episode, the duo enlisted the help of several recycling critics to discuss its problems -- high energy consumption to convert the post-consumer materials into usable material, pollution stemming from recycling plants, and plenty of available landfill land.

To a certain degree, both anti-recyclers and pro-recyclers are right.

For instance, running additional trucks to pick up waste that already exists costs more in fuel, adds congestion to roads and creates more vehicle-related pollution. And some kinds of recycling, such as paper, require more energy to process than using virgin materials -- and result in the use of toxic chemicals that are not required in virgin production.

On the other hand, pro-recycling environmentalists argue that the process to re-use aluminum and glass products results in very little lost material. And to counter the additional argument against paper recycling -- that we plant more than enough trees every year on farms dedicated to paper production -- the Environmental Defense Fund reported that less native forests have to be harvested thanks to paper recycling.

"I'm a huge believer in recycling," Coyle said. "I think what you have to look at there is the life cycle of a product. I guess what I'd say to the naysayers is, talk to the NIMBYs who don't want another landfill in their backyard."

For now, recycling is not only here to stay but may be expanding in Southern Nevada.

A new post has been created at the county level to coordinate recycling programs and do proactive planning, something not required of the Clark County Health District -- which simply tabulates recycling rates and promotes code enforcement.

Meanwhile, Coyle is working on ways to promote participation in the recycling program and improve it. One idea on the drawing board is to change the bin types to a wheeled-cart system like that in California. Coyle said he believes that if recycling is easier physically, more people will participate.

"If you make it convenient for people, recycling is something that people actually enjoy doing," the Republic Services president said. "In the cities I've worked in, whenever we did customer satisfaction surveys, the one thing that always tests over 90-percent satisfaction is recycling."

"People, it makes them feel good about doing something for the environment. We all drive around in cars that pollute our air and we all know of situations where our water isn't as clean as we'd like it to be. And whether it's a guilt feeling or just, 'I really feel good about doing something for the environment,' people like to recycle."

Friedman, too, is looking for ways to help Nevadans increase their participation levels. His office receives about 150 calls a month, mostly through the state recycling hotline (see sidebar), requesting information on how to recycle. He said his office is looking into the possibility of launching an educational campaign.

The state recycling coordinator said that most people think recycling is a good idea, which helps.

"Even if they don't practice it, they definitely believe in it," Friedman said. "People believe in it, but people believe in a lot of things they don't practice."

According to the Container Recycling Institute, a lobbyist organization, recycling rates are at their lowest in 25 years. The organization's data shows that a trillion aluminum cans that could have been recycled since 1972 were instead thrown in the trash.

Environmental nonprofit organization Grass Roots Recycling Network confirms this to

some degree in its own report, which said: "Easily recycled materials continue to be thrown away: 73 percent of glass containers, 77 percent of magazines, 75 percent of plastic containers and 45 percent of newspapers and aluminum beverage cans. In addition, many products today are not designed to be repaired, reused or recycled."

Participation is fundamental to any recycling program's success. Joslin said that participation rates are higher in the valley's more suburban neighborhoods, like Summerlin and Green Valley, than other areas.

"There's a lot of people here who choose not to participate," Joslin said.

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### **Fast Facts**

\* The Nevada Division of Environmental Protection oversees recycling programs statewide. For information or to report violations, contact the recycling hotline at 800-597-5865.

\* Republic Services handles all local residential curbside recycling. They accept aluminum, tin cans, plastic bottles (types one and two only), newspapers, telephone books, magazines, cardboard and glass bottles. For information on services, contact the company at 702-735-5151.

\* For those ineligible for curbside recycling, mainly those in apartments, condos or small office complexes, drop-off recycling is available at Republic Services' Recycling Center (333 W. Gowan Road) in North Las Vegas.

\* Drop-off recycling is also available through UNLV's Rebel Recycling program on campus. Call 702-895-3760 for location and availability.

\* To recycle automobiles or appliances, contact commercial recycling companies.

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